## ■ On Slaveholders' Sexual Abuse of Slaves ■

Selections from 19th- & 20th-century Slave Narratives

For many enslaved African Americans, one of the cruelest hardships they endured was sexual abuse by the slaveholders, overseers, and other white men and women whose

power to dominate them was complete. Enslaved women were forced to submit to their masters' sexual advances, perhaps bearing children who would engender the rage of a master's wife, and from whom they might be separated forever as a result. Masters forcibly paired "good breeders" to produce strong children they could sell at a high price. Resistance brought severe punishment, often death. "I know these facts will seem too awful to relate," warns former slave William J. Anderson in his 1857 narrative, ". . . as they are some of the *real* 'dark deeds of American Slavery."

Presented here are selections from two groups of narratives: 19<sup>th</sup>-century memoirs of fugitive slaves, often published by abolitionist societies, and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century interviews of former slaves compiled in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narrative Project (reproduced here as transcribed by the interviewers).<sup>1</sup>

Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say. Didn't have much of that until the men from South Carolina come up here [North Carolina] and settle and bring slaves. Then they take them very same children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them. If the Missus find out she raise revolution. But she hardly find out. The white men not going to tell and the nigger women were always afraid to. So they jes go on hopin' that thing[s] won't be that way always.

W. L. BOST, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

The slave traders would buy young and able farm men and well developed young girls with fine physique to barter and sell. They would bring them to the taverns where there would be the buyers and traders, display them and offer them for sale. At one of these gatherings a colored girl, a mulatto of fine stature and good looks, was put on sale. She was of high spirits and determined disposition. At night she was taken by the trader to his room to satisfy his bestial nature. She could not be coerced or forced, so she was attacked by him. In the struggle she grabbed a knife and with it, she sterilized him and from the result of injury he died the next day. She was charged with murder. Gen. Butler, hearing of it, sent troops to Charles County [Maryland] to protect her, they brought her to to Baltimore, later she was taken to Washington where she was set free. . . This attack was the result of being goodlooking, for which many a poor girl in Charles County paid the price. There are several cases I could mention, but they are distasteful to me. . . .

There was a doctor in the neighborhood who bought a girl and installed her on the place for his own use, his wife hearing it severely beat her. One day her little child was playing in the yard. It fell head down in a post hole filled with water and drowned. His wife left him; afterward she said it was an affliction put on her husband for his sins.

Let me explain to you very plain without prejudice one way or the other, I have had many opportunities, a chance to watch white men and women in my long career, colored women have many hard battles to fight to protect themselves from assault by employers, white male servants or by white men, many times not being able to protect [themselves], in fear of losing their positions. Then on the other hand they were subjected to many impositions by the women of the household through woman's jealousy.

RICHARD MACKS, enslaved in Maryland, interviewed 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

One time dey sent me on Ol' man Mack Williams' farm here in Jasper County [Georgia]. Dat man would kill you sho. If dat little branch on his plantation could talk it would tell many a tale 'bout folks

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. WPA narratives presented as transcribed by interviewers. Some spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing modernized in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives. Full text of WPA narratives (as digital images) online in American Memory (Library of Congress) at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Full text of 19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives online in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/index.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See "A Note on the Language of the Narratives" at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at national humanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

bein' knocked in de head. I done seen Mack Williams kill folks an' I done seen 'im have folks killed. One day he tol' me dat if my wife had been good lookin', I never would sleep wid her agin 'cause he'd kill me an' take her an' raise chilluns off'n her. Dey uster [used to] take women away fum dere husbands an' put wid some other man to breed jes' like dey would do cattle. Dey always kept a man penned up an' dey used 'im like a stud hoss.

WILLIAM WARD, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

Durin' slavery if one marster had a big boy en 'nuther had a big gal de marsters made dem libe tergedder. Ef'n de 'oman didn't hab any chilluns, she wuz put on de block en sold en 'nuther 'oman bought. You see dey raised de chilluns ter mek money on jes lak we raise pigs ter sell.

SYLVIA WATKINS, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

I 'member he had a real pretty gal on his place. . . One of the overseers was crazy about her, but her mother had told her not to let any of 'em go with her. So this old overseer would stick close 'round her when they was workin', just so he could get a chance to say somethin' to her. He kept followin' this child and followin' this child until she almost went crazy. Way afterwhile she run away and come to our house and and stayed 'bout three days. When my marster found out she was there, he told her she would have to go back, or at least she would have to leave his place. He didn't want no trouble with nobody. When that child left us she stayed in the woods until she got so hungry she just had to go back. This old man was mad with her for leavin', and one day while she was in the field he started at her again and she told him flat footed she warn't goin' with him he took the big end of his cow hide and struck her in the back so hard it knocked her plumb crazy. It was a big lake of water about ten yards in front of 'em, and if her mother hadn't run and caught her she would have walked right in it and drowned.

In them times white men went with colored gals and women bold[ly]. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him, and his wife didn't say nothin' 'bout it. Not only the men, but the women went with colored men too. That's why so many women slave owners wouldn't marry, 'cause they was goin' with one of their slaves. These things that's goin' on now ain't new, they been happenin'. That's why I say you just as well leave 'em alone 'cause they gwine [going] to do what they want to anyhow. . . .

... Now sometimes, if you was a real pretty young gal, somebody would buy you without knowin' anythin' 'bout you, just for yourself. Before my old marster died, he had a pretty gal he was goin' with and he wouldn't let her work nowhere but in the house, and his wife nor nobody else didn't say nothin' 'bout it; they knowed better. She had three chillun for him and when he died his brother come and got the gal and the chillun.

One white lady that lived near us at McBean slipped in a colored gal's room and cut her baby's head clean off 'cause it belonged to her husband. He beat her 'bout it and started to kill her, but she begged so I reckon he got to feelin' sorry for her. But he kept goin' with the colored gal and they had more chillun.

Unnamed former slave, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

Dey lots of places where de young massas has heirs by nigger gals. Dey sell dem jes' like other slaves. Dat purty common. It seem like de white women don't mind. Dey didn't 'ject [object], 'cause dat mean more slaves.

CHRIS FRANKLIN, enslaved in Louisiana, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

[Interviewer's summary] On this plantation were more than 100 slaves who were mated indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions. If their master thought that a certain man and woman might have strong, healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relation, even though they were married to other slaves. If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones, "Big Jim" would make them consummate this relationship in his presence. He used the same procedure if he thought a certain couple was not producing children fast enough. He enjoyed these orgies

very much and often entertained his friends in this manner; quite often he and his guests would engage in these debaucheries, choosing for themselves the prettiest of the young women. Sometimes they forced the unhappy husbands and lovers of their victims to look on.

Louisa and Sam were married in a very revolting manner. To quote [Louisa]:

"Marse Jim called me and Sam ter him and ordered Sam to pull off his shirt — that was all the McClain niggers wore — and he said to me: Nor, 'do you think you can stand this big nigger?' He had that old bull whip flung acrost his shoulder, and Lawd, that man could hit so hard! So I jes said 'yassur, I guess so,' and tried to hide my face so I couldn't see Sam's nakedness, but he made me look at him anyhow."

"Well, he told us what we must git busy and do in his presence, and we had to do it. After that we were considered man and wife. Me and Sam was a healthy pair and had fine, big babies, so I never had another man forced on me, thank God. Sam was kind to me and I learnt to love him."

SAM & LOUISA EVERETT, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed 1936 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

If a hand were noted for raising up strong black bucks, bucks that would never "let the monkey get them" while in the high-noon hoeing, he would be sent out as a species of circuit-rider to the other plantations — to plantations where there was over-plus of "worthless young nigger gals." There he would be "married off" again — time and again. This was thrifty and saved any actual purchase of new stock.

JOHN COLE, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed 1937, as paraphrased by the interviewer [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

He had so many slaves he did not know all their names. His fortune was his slaves. He did not sell slaves and he did not buy many, the last ten years preceding the war. He resorted to raising his own slaves. . . .

... A slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old. . . .

Mother said there were cases where these young girls loved someone else and would have to receive the attentions of men of the master's choice. This was a general custom. . . The masters called themselves Christians, went to church worship regularly and yet allowed this condition to exist.

HILLIARD YELLERDAY, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

Dere am one thing Massa Hawkins does to me what I can't shunt from my mind. I knows he don't do it for meanness, but I allus [always] holds it 'gainst him. What he done am force me to live with dat nigger, Rufus, 'gainst my wants.

After I been at he place 'bout a year, de massa come to me and say, "You gwine live with Rufus in dat cabin over yonder. Go fix it for livin'." I's 'bout sixteen year old and has no larnin', and I's jus' igno'mus chile. I's thought dat him mean for me to tend de cabin for Rufus and some other niggers. Well, dat am start de pestigation for me.

I's took charge of de cabin after work am done and fixes supper. Now, I don't like dat Rufus, 'cause he a bully. He am big and 'cause he so, he think everybody do what him say. We'uns has supper, den I goes here and dere talkin', till I's ready for sleep and den I gits in de bunk. After I's in, dat nigger come and crawl in de bunk with me 'fore I knows it. I says, "What you means, you fool nigger!" He say for me to hush de mouth. "Dis em my bunk, too," he say.

"You's teched in de head. Git out," I's told him, and I puts de feet 'gainst him and give him a shove and out he go on de floor 'fore he know what I's doin'. Dat nigger jump up and he mad. He look like de wild boar. He starts for de bunk and I jumps quick for de poker. It am 'bout three foot long and when he comes at me I lets him have it over de head. Did dat nigger stop in he tracks! I's say he did. He looks at me steady for a minute and you's could tell he thinkin' hard. Den he go and set on de bench and say, "Jus wait. You thinks it am smart, but you's am foolish in de head. Dey's gwine larn you somethin.'

"Hush yous big mouth and stay 'way from dis nigger, dat all I wants," I say, and jus' sets and hold dat poker in de hand. He jus' sets, lookin' like de bull. Dere we'uns sets and sets for 'bout an hour and den he go out and I bars de door.

De nex' day I goes to de missy [mistress: master's wife] and tells her what Rufus wants and missy say dat am de massa's wishes. She say, "Yous am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillen.

I's thinkin' 'bout what de missy say, but say to myse'f, "I's not gwine live with dat Rufus." Dat night when him come in de cabin, I grabs de poker and sits on de bench and says, "Git 'way from me, nigger, 'fore I busts yous brains out and stomp on dem." He say nothin' and git out.

De nex' day de massa call me and tell me, "Woman, I's pay big money for you and I's done dat for de cause I wants yous to raise me chillens. I's put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn't want whippin' at de stake, yous do what I wants."

I thinks 'bout massa buyin' me offen de [auction] block and savin' me from bein' sep'rated from my folks and 'bout bein' whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I's to do? So I 'cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields. . . .

I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience am 'nough for dis nigger. After what I does for de massa, I's never wants no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to 'scuse me and look for some others for to 'plenish de earth.

ROSE WILLIAMS, enslaved in Texas, interviewed ca. 1937 [WPA Slave Narrative Project]

My master often went to the house, got drunk, and then came out to the field to whip, cut, slash, curse, swear, beat and knock down several, for the smallest offense, or nothing at all.

He divested a poor female slave of all wearing apparel, tied her down to stakes, and whipped her with a handsaw until he broke it over her naked body. In process of time he ravished her person and became the father of a child by her. Besides, he always kept a colored Miss in the house with him. This is another curse of Slavery — concubinage and illegitimate connections — which is carried on to an alarming extent in the far South. A poor slave man who lives close by his wife is permitted to visit her but very seldom, and other men, both white and colored, cohabit with her. It is undoubtedly the worst place of incest and bigamy in the world. A white man thinks nothing of putting a colored man out to carry the fore row [front row in field work] and carry on the same sport with the colored man's wife at the same time.

I know these facts will seem too awful to relate, but I am constrained to write of such revolting deeds, as they are some of the *real* "dark deeds of American Slavery." Then, kind reader, pursue my narrative, remembering that I give no fiction in my details of horrid scenes. Nay, believe, with me, that the half can never be told of the misery the poor slaves are still suffering in this so-called land of freedom.

WILLIAM J. ANDERSON, Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave, 1857

I knew a man at the South who had six children by a colored slave. Then there was a fuss between him and his wife, and he sold all the children but the oldest slave daughter. Afterward, he had a child by this daughter, and sold mother and child before the birth. This was nearly forty years ago. Such things are done frequently in the South. One brother sells the other: I have seen that done.

WILLIAM THOMPSON, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Ontario, Canada, 1855; in Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, 1856 ■

[Patsey] had a genial and pleasant temper, and was faithful and obedient. Naturally, she was a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence. Yet Patsey wept oftener and suffered more than any of her companions. She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes — not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two she was indeed accursed.

In the great house, for days together, there were high and angry words, poutings and estrangement, whereof she was the innocent cause. Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see her suffer, and more than once, when Epps had refused to sell her, has she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp. Gladly would Patsey have

appeased this unforgiving spirit if it had been in her power, but not like Joseph, dared she escape from Master Epps, leaving her garment in his hand. Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will, the lash was resorted to at once to bring her to subjection. If she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood or a broken bottle, perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life.

SOLOMON NORTHUP, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, 1853

I was born in North Carolina, in Caswell County, I am not able to tell in what month or year. What I shall now relate is what was told me by my mother and grandmother. A few months before I was born, my father married my mother's young mistress. As soon as my father's wife heard of my birth, she sent one of my mother's sisters to see whether I was white or black, and when my aunt had seen me, she returned back as soon as she could and told her mistress that I was white and resembled Mr. Roper very much. Mr. Roper's wife not being pleased with this report, she got a large club-stick and knife, and hastened to the place in which my mother was confined. She went into my mother's room with a full intention to murder me with her knife and club, but as she was going to stick the knife into me, my grandmother happening to come in, caught the knife and saved my life. But as well as I can recollect from what my mother told me, my father sold her and myself soon after her confinement [period of seclusion after childbirth].

MOSES ROPER, Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery, 1840 ■

There is no legal marriage among the slaves of the South. I never saw nor heard of such a thing in my life, and I have been through seven of the slave states. A slave marrying according to law is a thing unknown in the history of American Slavery. And be it known to the disgrace of our country that every slaveholder, who is the keeper of a number of slaves of both sexes, is also the keeper of a house or houses of ill-fame. Licentious white men can and do enter at night or day the lodging places of slaves, break up the bonds of affection in families, destroy all their domestic and social union for life; and the laws of the country afford them no protection.

HENRY BIBB, Narratives of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, 1849 ■

There was a whisper that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence. Indeed, I now have reason to think he was not. Nevertheless the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that, by the laws of slavery, children in all cases are reduced to the condition of their mothers. This arrangement admits of the greatest license to brutal slaveholders and their profligate sons, brothers, relations and friends, and gives to the pleasure of sin the additional attraction of profit. A whole volume might be written on this single feature of slavery, as I have observed it.

One might imagine that the children of such connections would fare better in the hands of their masters than other slaves. The rule is quite the other way, and a very little reflection will satisfy the reader that such is the case. A man who will enslave his own blood may not be safely relied on for magnanimity. Men do not love those who remind them of their sins — unless they have a mind to repent — and the mulatto child's face is a standing accusation against him who is master and father to the child. What is still worse, perhaps, such a child is a constant offense to the wife. She hates its very presence, and when a slaveholding woman hates, she wants not means [she doesn't lack methods] to give that hate telling effect. Women — white women, I mean — are IDOLS at the south, not WIVES, for the slave women are preferred in many instances; and if these *idols* but nod or lift a finger, woe to the poor victim: kicks, cuffs, and stripes are sure to follow. Masters are frequently compelled to sell this class of their slaves out of deference to the feelings of their white wives; and shocking and scandalous as it may seem for a man to sell his own blood to the traffickers in human flesh, it is often an act of humanity toward the slave-child to be thus removed from his merciless tormentors.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855

I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man — I spare the world his name — had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say that he persecuted me for four years, and I— I— became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life. He must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.

ELIZABETH KECKLEY, Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House, 1868

... But I now entered on my fifteenth year — a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import [meaning]. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. . . He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him — where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property, that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. . . .

... If God has bestowed beauty upon her [a female slave], it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings. The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me, but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof, and they were aware that to speak of them was an offense that never went unpunished. . . .

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences. . . .

Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation, and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into the slave-trader's hands as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight. . . .

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles inculcated by some pious mother or grandmother or some good mistress; she may have a lover whose good opinion and peace of mind are dear to her heart; or the profligate men who have power over her may be exceedingly odious to her. But resistance is hopeless.

"The poor worm
Shall prove her contest vain. Life's little day
Shall pass, and she is gone!"

The slaveholder's sons are, of course, vitiated, even while boys, by the unclean influences everywhere around them. Nor do the master's daughters always escape. Severe retributions sometimes come upon him for the wrongs he does to the daughters of the slaves. The white daughters early hear their parents quarrelling about some female slave. Their curiosity is excited, and they soon learn the cause. They are attended by the young slave girls whom their father has corrupted; and they hear such talk as should never meet youthful ears or any other ears. They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things, and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves. I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame, for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure. Her father, half frantic with rage, sought to revenge himself on the offending black man, but his daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers and sent him out of the state.

In such cases the infant is smothered or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history. But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market. If they are girls, I have indicated plainly enough what will be their inevitable destiny.

You may believe what I say, for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify from my own experience and observation that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual, the sons violent and licentious. It contaminates the daughters and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.

Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops — not of the blight on their children's souls.

If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment, and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls.

HARRIET JACOBS, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 1861 ■